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ABSTRACT

Presenting testimony from various sources, this report describes growing resentment in the American Indian community of Anglo media misinterpretation and exploitation of Indian culture and Indian people. The full text of the Navajo Nation's plan for a Navajo Communications Board (established by the Advisory Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council) is presented as evidence of such resentment in the Southwest. Additionally, criticism from the Indian media is presented (Wassaja, The Navajo Times, The American Indian Press Association, The Ramah Navajo Broadcasting Station, etc.). Results of a survey are presented to indicate the lack of Indian representation in the New Mexico media where there is only one Indian reporter (Albuquerque Journal) and two Indian correspondents (Farmington Daily Times and the Santa Fe New Mexican). Citing lack of self determination, formal training, and organized tribal input as major deterrents (outside of Anglo domination) to the lack of Indian media representation, this report concludes with a brief description of the progress now being made by: (1) Ron Wood and Native Americans for Community Action; (2) Chester Yazzie and the Navajo Nation Report (a half-hour television program out of Flagstaff, Arizona); and (3) Ernest Lavato and the Communications Center for the All Indian Pueblo Council in Albuquerque. (JC)

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NATIVE AMERICANS

AND THE MASS MEDIA

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Paper presented at the 18th Annual Conference of the Western Social Science Association, April 29-30, May 1, 1976, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona

NATIVE AMERICANS
AND THE MASS MEDIA

by

Ray Newton

"What would your attitude be if you and your family went to a movie or watched television and the Indians you viewed were portrayed as drunken savages who attacked wagon trains and tortured settlers?"

"How would you like it if someone used pictures and statues of your great leaders to advertise hamburgers and fake jewelry or to identify pawn shops?"

"What would you feel like if someone, without permission, took photographs of your mother or grandmother hanging out laundry or of your father washing the car, and then sold them and they came out in the newspapers or on calendars or postcards?"[1]

These and similar questions asked by speakers from several Southwestern Indian tribes apparently reflect a general attitude among many Native Americans toward commercial mass media.

Such attitudes were explored in depth during a March, 1975, Northern Arizona University journalism department-sponsored conference which focused upon "Native Americans and the Mass Media." Journalism students, professors and some professionals heard representatives from major tribes talk about their reactions to media--and these reactions revealed a growing hostility among Indians toward the "white man's communications about Native Americans."[2]

Ray Baldwin Louis, a public relations associate for the Navajo Nation Film and Media Commission, told participants, "It's unfortunate that mass media have created stereotypes of all Indians, but from our point of view, it seems that way. The Wounded Knee coverage reinforced this stereotype, as did the recent incident at Shiprock, New Mexico, when some Indians took over the Fairchild plant in protest over what were considered unfair employment practices."[3]

Louis, a Navajo, has his bachelor's degree in journalism from Brigham Young University.

"We Indians don't resent it totally when reporters and photographers visit our nation and write stories about our lives and culture, for we feel we have many good things to share. What we do resent is the sensationalizing of news--making it appear that we're all primitive and potentially savages."[4]

Louis, 25, said he believed it unfortunate that major newspapers and radio and television stations in the Southwest did not have Native Americans as correspondents on reservations.

"We have in the Southwest the biggest concentration of Indians of anywhere in the United States, yet few stories released about Indians are conceived by Indians. Instead, non-Indians visit reservations, write stories and take pictures, with the result that our culture and traditions are often misinterpreted for the general public," he said.[5]

Growing resentment about such misinterpretation and exploitation has prompted several tribes in the Southwest (who represent more than 20 per cent of the total Indian population)[6] to pass resolutions which

regulate stringently what may legitimately be printed, broadcast or filmed on Indian reservations. One such resolution was passed by the Navajo Tribal Council in April, 1974.

RESOLUTION OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF THE NAVAJO TRIBAL COUNCIL

Establishing a Plan of Operations for the Navajo Communications Board

WHEREAS:

1. It is in the best interest of the Navajo Nation and the Navajo people that all filming and other activities concerning the preparation of movies, films, documents, news releases, books, pamphlets and brochures, conducted within the Navajo Nation, be regulated and controlled under an entity of the Navajo Tribe, and

2. Too many people and groups frequently enter upon the lands of the Navajo Nation for the purpose of taking films of the Navajo landscape and other materials without the consent of the Navajo Tribe in disregard of individual privacy or without regard for the property of the Navajo Nation and the Navajo people, and

3. Full protection and preservation of the scenic beauty and culture of the Navajo Nation can only be ensured by establishing a Tribal entity, with adequate and full authority to regulate all filming and other activities mentioned above, and

4. A Motion Picture Review Committee was established by Raymond Nakai, then Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, and on April 26, 1971, Chairman Peter MacDonald established the

Navajo Communications Board which superceded the functions of the Motion Picture Review Committee, and on July 5, 1973, Chairman Peter MacDonald, by Executive Order, further enhanced the purpose and authority of the Navajo Communications Board.

NOW BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT:

1. The Advisory Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council hereby creates and established a Tribal entity to be known as the Navajo Communications Board.

2. The attached Plan of Operation for such Board is hereby approved and adopted as part of this resolution, and may be amended from time to time by the Advisory Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council.

3. The Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council is hereby authorized and empowered to do any and all things necessary, both direct and incidental, to accomplish the purpose of this resolution and the Plan of Operation.

4. Any person, organization, corporation, association or agencies of the United States Government, state governments, their political subdivisions or their agencies must obtain the Board's permission and permit prior to any kind of filming, photographing, recording, interviewing Navajo people for the development of films, books, news releases, pamphlets, brochures, documentaries, broadcasts, and other forms of written or pictorial description of the Navajo Nation, its environmental surroundings, and its people.

5. Henceforth, the Board is authorized to adopt and enforce such reasonable regulations as they deem necessary to execute the purpose of this resolution.

6. All monies collected by the Navajo Communications Board still in Account Number 8450 shall be transferred to a revolving account designated by the Office of the Controller and shall be used by the Navajo Communications Board in its establishment and operation.

CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that the foregoing resolution was duly considered by the Advisory Committee of the Navajo Tribal Council at a duly called meeting at Window Rock, Navajo Nation (Arizona), at which a quorum was present and that same was passed by a vote of 14 in favor and 1 opposed, this 18th day of April, 1974.

(s) Wilson C. Skeet
Vice Chairman
Navajo Tribal Council[7]

Critical reaction to and ill-will toward the dominantly Anglo media using Native Americans as subject matter is not restricted to the Southwest. In March, 1976, the lead editorial in Wassaja, which calls itself the "National Newspaper of the Indian America," said:

> ...the use and misuse of the Indian has continued. Non-Indian organizations collect money for 'the poor Indians.' Non-Indians gather in rabbit warrens of organized groups to parade in synthetic feathers and buckskin. The worst examples of such exploitation exist in Los Angeles.

Here there are various organizations pretending to be Indian, publishing magazines and newspapers, and soliciting advertising for such publications. The American Indian Times is one such publication. This group was exposed in Wassaja last year. For a time it went below ground, where it in fact belongs: dead. It has now surfaced, and Wassaja is receiving complaints from corporations, companies and Better Business Bureaus all over the country.

In a telephone conversation reported to Wassaja by a New York corporation, the American Indian Times claimed a circulation of 2 million. That alone should create suspicion. It's so wild a claim, the imagination is taxed to understand how anyone could even try such a falsification.

This magazine is not Indian. It solicits by wats line telephone, using various Indian-sounding names. Not one Indian newspaper solicits by telephone. Remember that.

Still another group, with whom we are very familiar, since Wassaja fired them, is the Native American Media. This group is soliciting memberships in their group, at fees reportedly ranging from $800 to $1200 a year. They promise to deliver facilities of an employment center, making Indians available for jobs. According to reliable reports received by Wassaja, one Mike Roberts is now claiming to be 'Mohawk.' We knew him as a light-brown-haired young man, about 6'5" in height, of Jewish extraction. He has used the name of Jay Clearwater and Littlefeather in his wats line telephone contacts.

Roberts-Clearwater-Littlefeather was exposed in an article in The Navajo Times, on a complaint made to that Indian newspaper involving the United American Indian Agency, now known as the American Indian Times.

The Los Angeles Indian Center has filed complaints with the U.S. Post Office. There has been no action. A complaint has now been filed with the U.S. Department of Justice, asking for a complete investigation of all boiler-room activities in Los Angeles.

Misrepresentation, false claims and promises to deliver services that cannot or will not be delivered are illegal. More than any other part of the population, the American Indian suffers from such exploitation. One way or another, it will have to stop.

Richard LaCourse, the articulate news director of the American Indian Press Association, has been equally critical of media for several years. LaCourse, a member of the Yakima tribe from Washington state, openly disapproved of media when he talked at the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.:

> In 1970, a group of Indian editors, from 18 papers in the United States, came together out of a self-defined need. The Indian editors--who were from North Carolina, Alaska, the Dakotas, and some urban Indian papers such as Denver--felt that the news which was available to the Indian public was distorted, inaccurate and not sufficiently responsible or comprehensive. They decided to take things into their own hands and begin to prepare a responsible transmission of news among the Indian people. They worked from the summer of 1970 to the spring of 1971 to develop financing, primarily from the private sector, churches and such, and came into Washington to set up a news bureau here.
>
> ...this news is carried on a continuing basis to all the other Indian publications around the country which cannot put their own news together. So what the news service is attempting to do is to get a constant, continuing , responsible flow of information about things which really matter within the Indian world to Indian listeners and Indian readers.
>
> I think the central problem, as defined by both Canadian and American Indian people, is that nobody really understands what the special citizenship status of Indians is. Hence, we have a whole lot of ignorance, a lot of stereotypes, a lot of things which are flatly called racism. These problems cause the loss of Indian land and create deep human havoc in Indian families, resulting in all the psychological and social woes which we know about that Indian people suffer.
>
> If you look for Indian news in the majority press, you find the Indians practically edited out of existence. The serious concerns, the complex legal entanglements which ensnarl Indian people are almost never accurately or adequately defined through the media.[9]

Another panelist at the same meeting, Kim Hodgson, is the director of the only Indian-operated radio station in America--the Ramah Navajo

facility in Ramah, N.M. Hodgson, with aid from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Office of Economic Opportunity, initiated the drive to construct and operate the station because he was disenchanted with Anglo media.

> The media have traditionally been in the hands of the dominant society--almost to the point that it would be difficult to conceive how you would break in, or how it would relate to a community like Ramah, for example. The people began saying, 'Wait a minute, we can educate ourselves, we can take over this institution.'[10]

Completed in April, 1972, the Ramah station is directed toward approximately 1,500 people in about 1,000 square miles. Hodgson views the station as serving several functions.

> We conceive of one of our responsibilities at the Ramah radio station, even though we are a very locally oriented station, as being able to train people for media work in the future.
>
> But we're also very pleased, in a sense, that we have been able to develop skills in our local people that have just local significance. The All Indian Pueblo Council is currently involved in a radio and television project, and the initial phase of that project is training. They have placed a number of young men and women from the various Pueblos with several newspapers and radio stations in the New Mexico area. I believe, in fact, that a Zuni Pueblo man is going to be placed with us and will work with us in the next six months.
>
> ...I think that communications is probably one of the most important industries or occupations for Indian people in the future.[11]

Not all Southwestern Indians are as optimistic as Hodgson about involving Native Americans in mass media, particularly newspaper work. In July, 1975, two Indians, W. Oandasan and Manuel Pino, reported that only one Indian reporter worked for non-Indian newspapers in New Mexico--a state where approximately one-third the population is Native American.[12]

> The number of Indian reporters, correspondents and columnists, or special interest sections in the non-Indian newspapers is grossly inadequate. Of all the newspapers visited, only one Indian reporter was found, and he was with the Albuquerque Journal, a daily. The reason commonly given for lack of representation of Indian reporters by the managing editors and the publishers interviewed was that there were no 'qualified Indians applying for reporter positions--at least to our knowledge.'
>
> Jim Largo, the Indian reporter for the Journal, a Navajo from Crownpoint, N.M., . . . feels there are many qualified Indian reporters, but eh newspapers are looking for persons with degrees. He said the main problems he has encountered are misinterpretations in the editing of his stories and the lack of newspaper interest in Indian issues, which editors see as too repetitious.[13]

Oandasan and Pino reported that only two New Mexico newspapers had Indian correspondents: the Farmington Daily Times and the Santa Fe New Mexican. They also reported that with the exception of the Farmington newspaper, no Indian sections were included in any other newspapers they surveyed. They said that of those they surveyed, only three persons working for the New Mexico non-Indian press had heard of the American Indian Press Association and its news service. Most Indian news was taken from the major wire services rather than from staff reporters, the two Indians reported.[14]

They did praise three New Mexico reporters for their attempts to cover Indian news: Ralph Looney of the Albuquerque Tribune, who received the Robert F. Kennedy Award for his series of Navajo reports; Bill Hume of the Albuquerque Journal for his expertise on Indian water rights; and Bill Donovan, a correspondent for the Gallup Independent who lives at Window Rock, the Navajo Nation capital.[15]

Oandasan and Pino concluded that their survey revealed an ignorance of and sometimes unconcern for Indians news in New Mexico. They said:

> This disgrace of the newspaper coverage of Indian issues and events in New Mexico can be changed. How? By encouraging more Indians into the news reporting field, by providing them with training, by working towards making Indian newspapers financially self-sufficient, and by enlightening non-Indian newspapers that Indian writers are more capable and 'qualified' to write about their people than non-Indian writers.[16]

The above attitude was echoed by Ron Wood, a Navajo-Seminole who currently serves as the director of NACA--Native Americans for Community Action in Flagstaff, Ariz.

Wood said, "By reading area newspapers or watching television, readers or viewers (in the Flagstaff area--parentheses mine) would be unaware they lived close to the largest population of Indians in the United States unless something really dramatic happened."[17]

Wood, whose organization represents Navajos, Hopis, Havasupai, Apache and several other tribes in the region, criticized press coverage in the Flagstaff area particularly.

> About the only time Indians get a lot of press coverage is when Pow Wows like the one in Flagstaff or ceremonials like the one in Gallup are scheduled--and many of us feel the coverage is intended to attract tourists who will spend money with primarily non-Indian businesses.[18]

Wood, Ray Baldwin Louis, Chester Yazzie (a Navajo who founded the "Navajo Nation Report," a half-hour television program through KOAI-TV in Flagstaff, Ariz.) and Ernest Lovato, director of the Communications Center for the All Indian Pueblo Council (AIPC) in Albuquerque, N.M., were featured resource persons for the "Native Americans and the Mass Media" conference mentioned earlier.

Yazzie, who began his program in April, 1973, told conference participants that Indian disillusionment with mass media is "really the result of a lack of self-determination."[19]

> Indians are redefining themselves in the social system, and part of this redefinition is reflected through what others think of us. Because so many concepts about Indians are developed through media, we feel we should have something to say in what is and is not reported about us and our lifestyles. Until we can develop journalists who are familiar with Indian customs, we won't be able to influence the non-Indians whose primary image of us is not accurately drawn.
>
> We must begin to determine for ourselves what others think of us and quit letting the Bureau of Indian Affairs and comic strips and cartoons tell the rest of the country what we are like.[20]

Yazzie's broadcasts at KOAI-TV are part of a pilot project in the development of a broad Navajo communications network. Plans include a Navajo-owned and operated television station in Window Rock, a 100,000 watt FM radio station and a media training center.[21]

The media training program is already underway, with class work primarily occurring on the campus of Navajo Community College. Randall Ackley is directing a media workshop, and plans include the development of courses in radio, newspapers, and photography.[22]

The training program is part of the Multi-Tribal Communications System in the field of radio and television broadcasting. In September, 1975, the Navajo Film and Media Commission received a full-year scholarship from the American Broadcasting School to train a Navajo person in the field, reported Virgil Wyaco, executive planner for the Navajo Film and Media program.[23]

The Multi-Tribal Communication System is still in its formative stages. It nevertheless represents a growing awareness among all Indians, especially those in the Southwest, of the need for Indian-oriented and operated media. One of the more aggressive media development programs is in Albuquerque, where Ernest Lovato directs activities for both print and electronic communications. Through assistance from several federal and state agencies, Lovato and his staff are now publishing the bimonthly 19 Pueblo News. The newspaper uses a four-column format, is a tabloid, ranges in length from eight to twelve pages, and concentrates primarily upon Indian-originated news.

> Our main interest will be in news from the 19 Pueblos, news about Pueblo people and items of interest from the All Indian Pueblo Council and other groups such as the Eight Northern Pueblos or the Six Sandoval Pueblos. We will also carry some national Indian news. [24]

In September, 1975, the AIPC signed on the air from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. with KIPC-FM, a non-commercial public radio station which broadcasts at 91.5 Mhz. Lovato said the radio signal would cover a radius of approximately 100 miles. He also said the AIPC plans to erect relay stations at key points to extend the broadcast range into the rest of New Mexico and parts of Colorado, Utah and Arizona.[25]

> It is our philosophy to broadcast programming that meets the needs of all people. Our station will be multi-cultural and multi-lingual, with programs of interest to Native Americans, Spanish, Blacks and Anglos. Through this station, we will work extensively with organizations on the local and state levels to bring about human awareness of the needs of each cultural identity in our coverage area.[26]

Lovato told conference participants that he felt strongly about the need for less provincialism in media. He said, "All ethic groups must be represented through major media. The Blacks and the Mexican Americans began realizing this before we did--but now we know how important it is that Native Americans have some input into communications."[27]

He also suggested that Indians become more aggressive in developing input into major media.

> Tribes must begin designating someone or some agency to represent them in radio and television, newspapers and magazines and the newsgathering services. For example, the major networks should have Indians preview scripts and news items--not as censors--but as people who can spot inaccuracies and distortions.
>
> Indians should also have some Native American consultants working with local and state agencies. There should be an Indian desk in the Chamber of Commerce offices and in the State Departments of Development and Planning so that when people want to know about Indians, they can talk to Indians.
>
> Indians should be consulted when brochures and pamphlets are prepared with materials about Indians in them. We're not tourist attractions, yet when busses dump tourists on our reservations, they behave like wild horses. They go trampling through our fields, our yards--taking pictures and yelling at each other, 'Look, how cute.'[28]

Lovato and Yazzie and Wood and the other Native Americans who are leaders in the move toward more Indian involvement in mass media recognize they have a difficult task before them. Indians remain among the more poorly educated of all American, with a median number of years completed in the schools of 7.9.[29] Indians have a dropout rate of more than 30 per cent nationally--significantly higher than the national figure.[30] Only three per cent of the

Indians who enroll in college graduate; the national average is 32 per cent.[31] Until only recently, the educational effort on reservations and in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools was aimed at teaching Indians the English language and the "American" way of life. Indians were in an environment controlled and dominated by non-Indians and they had few Indian success models to imitate.[32]

Just these past years have Indians become aware of the positive force which mass media can play in their lives. More and more of them are recognizing that they can change their own and others' attitudes toward them through mass communications. Further, organizations around the nation are beginning to assist Indians in the same way they helped Blacks and Spanish Americans during the 60's.

> The American Friends Service Committee is sponsoring an American Indian Media program which began March 1 this year. Two Native Americans, Alan Kilpatrick and myself, were engaged on a fulltime basis to study programming and hiring practices in the television and motion picture industry. This program evolved out of the need to change the stereotyped image of Native Americans and to encourage Indian employment. We feel that the unique combination of a large concentration of Native Americans and a concentration of television and production activities lends credence to the program beginning in Los Angeles.
>
> We read the article, 'Tribes Rap Mass Media Portrayal of Indians' in the Nishnawbe News, February, 1976 issue, which explains in brief ~~the~~ conference your department held recently. With conferences such as your department held and programs such as ours and others at Flagstaff and Gallup, we should be making some kind of progress for balanced programming--which definitely has not been the case in the past.
>
> We would appreciate receiving information which would be helpful to our program, as we will be publishing a newsletter, First American Media Experience (FAME) and would like to include your conference in our newsletter.
>
> (s) Stella Montoya[33]

Perhaps Richard LaCourse of the American Indian Press Association summed up the Native American attitude toward involvement in mass media when he said:

> . . .I think that the most privileged people in America were finally recognized to be Indians, in that the way America had thought about herself for 80,90, 100 years suddenly was completely gone. We watched through the 1960s the breakup of society--the emergence of Poles as Poles, blacks as blacks, the Mexican Americans as Chicanos or Spanish-speaking, etc. And the people who have historically resisted America's self-definition have been Indian people. And when that tide went out, we were left the most privileged creatures here.
>
> We knew who we were. We knew what we could share with the rest of Americans, and we knew what we could not share. This gives the Indian communities, the Indian tribes, perhaps the strongest ace up their sleeve actually to begin transforming the rest of society, and communications is a very large way of doing it.[34]

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[6]The Southwest Indian Report, U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, p. 3.

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